

## Message Text

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ACTION EUR-12

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C O N F I D E N T I A L MILAN 0532

EO 11652: GDS  
TAGS: PINT PINR ECON BGEN IT  
SUBJECT: ISOLATIONISM IN ITALY: A VISIT TO MERANO

1. SUMMARY: A RECENT VISIT BY POST'S ECONOMIC OFFICER TO BOLZANO PROVINCE'S SECOND LARGEST CITY, MERANO, FOUND IT BUSTLING WITH TOURISTS, ITS SHOPS FULL, ITS CITY GOVERNMENT SOLID, AND ITS ECONOMY ROBUST. TALKING WITH MAYOR, POLITICAL LEADERS, BUSINESSMEN, BANKERS, AND FARM LEADERS REVEALED THAT CONCERNS IN MERANO WERE FAR FROM ITALY'S WELL-KNOWN POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC PROBLEMS. END SUMMARY.

2. ITALY'S TERRORISM, ON-GOING POLITICAL JOCKEYING, AND LINGERING ECONOMIC PROBLEMS MAKE IT EASY TO FORGET THAT TO A LOT OF ITALIANS, NEWSPAPER HEADLINES ONLY TELL WHAT IS HAPPENING TO OTHERS. THIS IS PARTICULARLY TRUE AWAY FROM NORTHERN ITALY'S LARGE URBAN CENTERS WHERE ITALY'S ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL PROBLEMS ARE HARDLY VISIBLE AND WHERE MANY PEOPLE CONSIDER THEMSELVES SELF-CONTAINED AND ISOLATED FROM COUNTRY'S DIFFICULTIES. VISIT TO MERANO ON MARCH 31 SHOWED IT TO BE EXCELLENT EXAMPLE OF THIS LOCAL ISOLATIONISM. THERE, ONLY FAR-OFF MILAN'S NEWSPAPERS PROPPED UP IN CORNER NEWSSTANDS  
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REMINDS OF THE MORO KIDNAPPING, THE RED BRIGADE TRIAL IN TURIN, OR THE FINANCIAL BIND OF ITALY'S LARGEST COMPANIES.

3. ABOUT 45 MINUTES DRIVE INTO MOUNTAINS FROM BOLZANO, MERANO IS FAVORITE TOURIST SPOT FOR GERMANS WHO RELAX IN WARM GREEN VALLEY BELOW OR SKI WINTERY SLOPES REACHABLE BY CABLE CAR ABOVE. MERANO IS ALSO BOLZANO PROVINCE'S

SECOND LARGEST CITY, HAS SCATTERING OF INDUSTRY INCLUDING HIGH TECHNOLOGY ELECTRONICS COMPANIES, AND IS IN HEART OF REGION'S RICH FRUIT AND WINE PRODUCING ZONE. ALTHOUGH CITY' INHABITANTS STILL CONSIDER THEMSELVES MORE SOUTH TIROLESE THAN ITALIANS, LESS THAN HALF OF THEM BELONG TO GERMAN-SPEAKING GROUP WHOSE GRANDFATHERS WERE AUSTRIANS.

4. THINGS RUN SMOOTHLY IN MERANO. GERMAN TOURISTS KEEP LOCAL MERCHANTS AND ARTISANS FAT; FARMERS (90 PERCENT OF THEM) HAVE BANDED TOGETHER IN CONSORTIUM WHICH SUCCESSFULLY MARKETS ITS PRODUCTS EVERYWHERE IN EUROPE; THERE IS NO UNEMPLOYMENT; AND THE AIR, WATER, AND COUNTRYSIDE ARE JUST AS CLEAN AND FRESH AS THEY EVER WERE.

5. EVEN THE PARTIES SEEM TO HAVE NO PROBLEM WORKING TOGETHER TO GOVERN COMMUNITY - A REAL ACHIEVEMENT OWING TO LOCAL POPULATION'S DIVISION INTO TWO DISTINCT ETHNIC AND LANGUAGE GROUPS. GERMAN-SPEAKING SVP (SUDTIROLER VOLKSPARTEI) PARTY, STRONGLY CRITICAL OF ALLEGED FAILURE OF DC AND ITALIAN PARTIES GENERALLY IN FOSTERING EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY FOR GERMAN SPEAKERS, COOPERATES NONETHELESS EASILY WITH DC AT CITY LEVEL. LARGEST GROUP IN CITY COUNCIL, SVP ACTIVELY SUPPORTS THE CITY'S YOUNG DC MAYOR, WHOM LOCAL SVP PRESIDENT PRAISED HIGHLY.

6. CITY SEEMED WELL RUN. MAYOR LEFT SHRP IMPRESSION.  
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WORKING AS BOTH MAYOR AND AS LOCAL DIRECTOR OF AMERICAN-OWNED ELECTRONICS FIRM, HE SEEMED FAR FROM STEREOTYPED ITALIAN POLITICIAN. HE LAMENTED DIFFICULTY OF FAIRLY SERVING INTERESTS OF BOTH LANGUAGE GROUPS. "WHEN WE BUILD SCHOOL FOR ITALIAN SPEAKERS, WE HAVE TO BUILD ONE FOR GERMAN SPEAKERS AS WELL", HE EXPLAINED. "BUT", HE SAID, "CITY GOVERNMENT WAS FINDING ACCEPTABLE SOLUTIONS TO PROBLEMS AS THEY AROSE." EVERYONE SEEMED TO AGREE WITH HIM.

7. JUST AS TOWERING ALPS ISOLATE MERANO GEOGRAPHICALLY, PEOPLE IN MERANO HOPE IT WILL STAY ISOLATED ECONOMICALLY AND SOCIALLY FROM REST OF ITALY. HEAD OF LARGEST BANK IN MERANO SAID CRIME AND HEAVY-HANDED UNIONISM WERE ITALIAN NOT LOCAL PROBLEMS. HEAD OF FARMER'S UNION REVEALED LOCAL SENTIMENT WELL WHEN HE TALKED ABOUT SITUATION IN ITALY, AND THEN IN MERANO.

8. MERANO'S ISOLATION FROM ITALY'S PROBLEMS IS NOT ALL THAT UNCOMMON IN NORTHERN ITALY. IT ONLY REMINDS US THAT OUTSIDE BIGGEST POPULATION CENTERS, LIFE GOES ON AS NORMAL, AND POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CRISES PLAGUING COUNTRY AS WHOLE HARDLY EXIST.FINA

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